OPINION

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'Active measures'

IN recent days we have been witnessing dramatic revelations about the extent of Soviet espionage. An American spy ring run by the Soviets has apparently passed major American military secrets to Moscow. A number of men have been arrested and are being charged with involvement. The extent of the leakage has spurred calls for harsher punishment against spying, including execution.

Mehmet Ali Agca, who shot and wounded the Pope in 1981, is spilling forth a story of Bulgarian and Soviet complicity at a hearing in Rome. It remains to be determined whether these are the ramblings of a clever liar or perhaps of a deranged man. But if they turn out to be true, and Moscow was involved in an assassination attempt on the Pope, the implications for East-West relations are chilling.

While these are particularly dramatic chapters in the history of Soviet espionage, Moscow is also involved in a lower-level but constantly ongoing effort at subversion generally known as disinformation. This is the responsibility of what was formerly Department D within the First Chief Directorate of the KGB, but which was later renamed the Active Measures Department.

Soviet active measures directed at the noncommunist world are either "gray" or "black." Gray measures involve the use of pro-communist fronts, local communist parties, or traditional media outlets. Black measures specialize in spreading rumors, planting false stories, and surfacing forgeries.

In recent years, the Soviets have become much more sophisticated at forging documents misrepresenting Western, and particularly, US, policies and falsely implicating Washington in bizarre schemes.

Some of this activity involves the acquisition of genuine American government documents and their alteration and publication to cast the United States in an unfavorable light.

It would not be surprising if some of the documents passed to the Soviets in the recently uncovered spy case were to turn up later in altered form.

Recently, for example, the Soviets tried to sabotage US-Spanish relations with a forged letter from President Reagan to the King of Spain. Intended to offend Spanish sensitivities, the letter implied heavy-handed presidential meddling in Spain's internal affairs. This forgery was quite skillful, with correct White House stationery and typescript. But it backfired. Mailed to the Spanish press, it was in fact exposed by Spanish journalists as a forgery.

In 1983, a fake airgram surfaced in Lima, Peru, suggesting that the US was planning to sell nuclear-tipped cruise missiles to Chile.

The previous year a forged letter appeared in Athens purporting to be from William Clark, then deputy secretary of state, to the American ambassador to Greece. The forgery suggested US support for the conservatives in forthcoming Greek elections and alluded to a possible military coup if Socialist leader Andreas Papandreou won at the polls, which he later did. The letter was published by a small Athens daily, which described it as of doubtful authenticity, probably attributable to a "third country" intelligence service.

One of the most interesting forgeries, in light of the Agca trial, involves two faked telegrams from the American Embassy in Rome in 1982. Although the cables contain some technical and format errors, they read very much like authentic State Department cables. They suggest that the US has orchestrated the arrest of a Bulgarian intelligence officer, Antonov, to blame the Bulgarians and Soviets for the papal assassination attempt.

The cables are forged, and in fact the State Department has taken a restrained and hands-off approach to the Italian investigation. Indeed, some critics have charged that the State Department has attempted to cover up alleged Soviet complicity to prevent jeopardizing improvement in US-Soviet relations.

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